

Polytheism and Monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines

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The territory to which my title alludes is otherwise and traditionally known in the Christian West as the Holy Land.¹ Among Jews everywhere it had long been called Eretz Israel, the homeland of the Jewish nation. It became no less holy in the Muslim world, for which Jerusalem is the site of its most sacred place outside Mecca. But if we think in terms of population density instead of history and tradition—and here I rely upon the excellent research of Claudine Dauphin on the population of Byzantine Palestine—these three great monotheistic religions had small claim to the land.² In the fourth and fifth centuries both Christians and Jews were in a minority. By the time conversions had given the Christians predominance, it was swept away by the Muslim conquests of the seventh century. The Muslims, like the Christians before them, began their rule as a distinct minority. From the time of Constantine the Christians had venerated the holy places of Palestine, and pilgrims had initiated a highly successful tourist trade that legitimized its profits through the construction of churches along the routes of the pious. The Jews, excluded from Jerusalem apart from one day in the year, had created powerful rabbinic schools in other cities such as Tiberias and Caesarea, but they were not all that numerous by comparison with non-Jews. In the Palestine that fell to the prophet Muhammad, Jews and Christians together inhabited a land where the majority had been, until relatively recently, what the Greek-speakers of the time called Hellenes, meaning pagans or polytheists.³

The arrogation of a word that had formerly meant Greek to designate such people represented in part the transmission of their religious heritage through Greek texts and in part their use of the Greek language to communicate with one another despite manifest disparities of cult. Our terms—*pagan* and *polytheist*—have become collective expressions for any peoples in this place and period who were not Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Obviously there are problems with an identity that is established negatively, and in some areas of religious studies today it has become fashionable to eschew these terms altogether. The word *polytheism* is somewhat more politically correct, it seems, than *paganism*,

¹Cf. R. L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven, Conn., 1992).

²C. Dauphin, "La Palestine byzantine du IV^e siècle au VII^e siècle ap. J.-C.: Le peuplement" (doctorat d'état, University of Paris, 1994).

³G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor-Cambridge, 1990).

but it does not please everyone. No one has yet suggested making use of the Latin equivalent *gentilis*, as “gentile” already has an indestructible presence in our language with the sense of non-Jew rather than polytheist (which is, after all, simply a subcategory of non-Jew). If we are not to be reduced to total aphasia in discussions of the religious structure of the late antique world, and particularly Arabia and the three Palestines, we will have to make do with the expression *polytheism*, keeping *paganism* in reserve for stylistic variation.

In an exceptionally provocative study, Garth Fowden has recently explored the confrontation of polytheism with monotheism as a fundamental explanation of the course of late antique and early medieval history in the East.⁴ His argument turns upon the supposition that there is a natural affinity between monotheism and political universalism (an expression by which he designates an aspiration to dominate the known world). A unitary outlook is thought to engender a unitary polity. And yet the success of the Roman Empire for nearly three centuries—an empire that was certainly the most extensive, coherent, and enduring of any in antiquity—constitutes proof, if any were needed, that polytheism was perfectly capable of sustaining political universalism. For that matter Isocrates and, after him, Alexander the Great showed that Greek polytheism could, to some extent, support a concept of world domination through shared Hellenism. But the Romans actually had an unmistakable equivalent to the unifying single god of the Christians: this was the cult of emperors, living and dead, rightly recognized by Fowden as the basis for polytheist universalism in the Roman era. It was so potent a force in consolidating power that, as we shall see, the Christian emperors actually maintained it officially for several generations and unofficially for generations after that.⁵

What Fowden has done with immense subtlety and sophistication is to demonstrate the attraction that monotheist Christianity had for an aggressive universalist monarch such as Constantine. In this point he returns to an interpretation enunciated just over a hundred and fifty years ago by Jacob Burckhardt in his much undervalued work *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*. But Burckhardt judged Constantine essentially irreligious, a pragmatic manipulator of ecclesiastical forces he thought could be helpful to him. Burckhardt saw good reason to convict Eusebius of tendentiousness and mendacity in his biography of the emperor. He believed that the Church used Constantine after his death in much the same way as Constantine had used the Church. Fowden has a much greater respect for Eusebius, although he acknowledges that few outside the upper reaches of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are likely to have read his biography in the fourth century. But he stresses, as Burckhardt had, the potential of Christian monotheism (and Islamic later) for imperialist domination.

Eusebius was bishop at Caesarea-by-the-Sea in Palestine. He rarely saw Constantine, yet he rightly considered him a precious resource for the growing Church. He could well have understood or intuited the universalist argument, inasmuch as he normally sat in a part of the empire that was home to the one other great monotheist religion of the ancient world. The Jews do not figure much in either Burckhardt's or Fowden's analysis,

⁴G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993).

⁵G. W. Bowersock, “The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. B. F. Mayer and E. P. Sanders, III (London, 1982), 171–82, with notes on 238–41; repr. in G. W. Bowersock, *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire* (Goldbach, 1994), 327–42.

perhaps because, if they had, the argument would have required substantial adjustment. The point is that a singularity of cultural identity—*paideia*, the imperial cult, monotheism—can serve as a basis for political aspiration and real change, but it does not necessarily do so. The Jews stand as a powerful counterexample. Their monotheism set them apart. The potential for using it politically was, of course, always there, and ironically it was Julian who understood this. Having rejected Christianity but understanding it exceedingly well, he sought to replace its monotheist energy by turning to the Jews, whose sole God appreciated sacrifice as the Christian God did not. Julian's courtship of the Jews took place in Palestine, and so once again, as with Eusebius, we return to what Burckhardt called this *Schlachtfeld aller Religionen*.⁶

Burckhardt was wrong to describe Roman and Byzantine Palestine in such terms. The miracle of the age was precisely the rarity of any major battle of religions between the suppression of Bar Kokhba in the second century and the Persian invasion in the early seventh. For four and a half centuries the whole area was largely untouched by armed conflict of any serious kind. The only significant exception to this unparalleled felicity might have been the mysterious tumult in the time of Gallus Caesar in the fourth century, but the magnitude and historicity of that event have long been in doubt. No source describes what happened as a revolt against Rome, and the one contemporary witness, Aurelius Victor, implies an internal Jewish disturbance, an implication reinforced by the ecclesiastical historian Socrates, who qualifies it as local (ἐγχώριος). Peter Schäfer adduced the rabbinic testimony for this alleged uprising in an important analysis, published in 1986, and he was able to demonstrate that not even the Jews themselves thought of this episode as a revolt and that the supposed archaeological evidence sometimes cited as proof of a major tumult simply reflects the earthquake of the year 363.⁷

It is true that the Byzantine government periodically attempted to restrain the observance of non-Christian cults, but these efforts, never generally successful, only served to drive other monotheists (such as Jews, Samaritans, and heretics) into a common category with polytheists. The decrees in Book XVI of the Theodosian Code repeatedly document this curious conjunction. Consider, for example, the text addressed to the praetorian prefect Asclepiodotus in April 423, beginning with reference to the emperor's *decreta, quibus abominandorum paganorum, Iudaeorum etiam adque haereticorum spiritum audaciamque compressimus* ("the decrees by which we have restrained the spirit and boldness of the abominable pagans, Jews, and heretics").⁸ The imperial edicts against such a comprehensive group, constituting, as it did, a population that was both monotheist and polytheist and far more numerous in the aggregate, at least until the sixth century, than the Christians themselves, had the paradoxical effect of encouraging a remarkable equilibrium among all segments of the three Palestines and Arabia.

This equilibrium is well illustrated in one of the most subtle and sophistic letters of

⁶J. Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (Basel, 1853; repr. Leipzig, 1936), 320.

⁷Aurelius Victor, *De Caes.* 49.9–12; Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.33. See P. Schäfer, "Der Aufstand gegen Gallus Caesar," in *Tradition and Re-interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honour of J. C. H. Lebram* (Leiden, 1986), 184–201. See also J. Arce, "La rebelión de los Judíos durante el gobierno de Constancio Galo Cesar: 353 D.C.," *Athenaeum* 65 (1987), 109–25.

⁸*CTh* 16.8.26.

Emperor Julian. The letter is addressed to the people of Bostra, capital of the small late antique province of Arabia.⁹ In a blustery opening Julian denounces as criminal any clerical incitement to violence against the pious pagans, and he recalls with obvious relish the brutal actions taken by Christians in the past against their own heretics. (As we know, he always set great store by the Christians' capacity to fight among themselves.) He then turns to Bostra, where there has not actually been any violence at all, and reports that the bishop, Titus, and his clergymen had written to take credit for restraining their flock from *ataxia*. He even cites a letter from the bishop to the effect that the local Christians would actually have been a match for the Hellenes (in other words, the pagans). With a display of righteous indignation Julian tells the Christians of Bostra that Titus has arrogated to himself *their* good sense and *eutaxia*. Because the bishop has wrongfully given them such bad publicity, he then urges the people to expel him from his bishopric. Julian's cunning appeal is of value in demonstrating precisely the lack of conflict at Bostra. To judge from the general quiescence all over Palestine, we may suspect that Julian was right in reproaching the bishop for taking credit for restraint.

The only conspicuous exceptions to this situation over hundreds of years tend to prove this general point. It took a militant monk from the outside, Barsauma the Monophysite from Mesopotamia (not to be confused with the Nestorian bishop of Nisibis), to upset the equilibrium by moving into the region with his pious henchmen to destroy both synagogues and temples, to persecute Jews and polytheists alike.¹⁰ For such a fanatic these people were all pagans together. Nothing of the kind happened from inside Palestine, and at one point even the government at Constantinople recognized that Barsauma's zeal would do no good to the cause of prudent administration. Legislation of 423 that protected the synagogues of the Jews from pillaging and destruction was the first response to the monk's vicious actions, although a novella of 438 later marked an unfortunate regression toward his militant intolerance.¹¹

The other important exception was the fierce independence of the monotheist Samaritans, whose hostility to their equally monotheist Jewish neighbors exploded into fraternal strife in 484 and 529.¹² Deaths were in the thousands, and many Samaritans emigrated both to the East and to the West. But the violence initiated by these people and the terrible reprisals that suppressed them cannot be called revolts, although this is the term that tends to be used on the relatively rare occasions when the subject is discussed. We are talking about the explosion of internecine animosity between two monotheist peoples, an animosity ultimately controlled by Byzantine forces in the interest of public order. For their own part, the Christians showed no great desire to cut themselves off from the pleasures of polytheist life, as Jacob of Sarug eloquently reveals in his homilies on the popularity of late antique mimes.¹³ In the sixth century, according to Procopius, Christians could be seen offering sacrifices and participating in other traditional

⁹Julian, *Epistula* 114, ed. J. Bidez, 435d–438c.

¹⁰F. Nau, "Résumé de Monographies syriaques," *ROC*, 2nd ser., 8, 18 (1913), 382.

¹¹*CTh* 16.10.24: *Sed hoc Christianis, qui vel vere sunt vel esse dicuntur, specialiter demandamus, ut Iudaeis ac paganis in quiete degentibus nihilque temptantibus turbulentum legibusque contrarium non audeant manus inferre religionis auctoritate abusi.*

¹²A. M. Rabello, *Giustiniano: Ebrei e Samaritani* (Milan, 1987); A. D. Crown, *The Samaritans* (Tübingen, 1989).

¹³C. Moss, "Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theatre," *Le Muséon* 48 (1935), 87–112.

Hellenic rituals at no less an urban center than Caesarea-by-the-Sea.¹⁴ Procopius believed these persons to have been crypto-pagans who were safeguarding their lives and property, but this is a hard distinction to draw.

The case of Palestine and Transjordan in late antiquity, examined together with the opinions of its bishops and rabbis, illustrates the porous nature of religious convictions among the people who lived there. Christian theological disputes that racked parts of Syria and Egypt did not take hold in Palestine. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the Palestinian envoy Juvenal was subjected to protest for his acceptance of the Chalcedonian position,¹⁵ but Monophysitism never became the cause of a rival ecclesiastical hierarchy, as happened in Syria and Egypt. The struggle of the non-Chalcedonians was simply not played out there.

It would seem as if the very diversity of the Palestinian population was its protection. This means that monotheism was not struggling against polytheism, nor heresy against orthodoxy, nor tribe against tribe. The few struggles that occurred over some four centuries appear to have been within the community of Semitic monotheists: the conflict between Jew and Samaritan was a peculiarly local feud, even if some Samaritans, like the Nabataeans, managed to export their faith overseas to various cities of the Greek world.¹⁶ This was a world in which religion provides no clue to political aspirations, a world that cannot be fitted at all into the pattern that Fowden has described. Not until the seventh century did the Palestinians become embroiled in war, and that was not at their initiative. If Persians or Muslims prepared to invade their land from the outside, the inhabitants were obviously confronted with a situation they could not ignore. It was hardly surprising that the response of Palestinians of various stripes was by no means uniform. But this was a fragmentation provoked by an almost Toynbeeian challenge from external forces.

The religious atmosphere before the seventh century can best be savored in particular places. Caesarea, Petra, and the northern Negev furnish good examples of patterns of life that are geographically distinct but culturally similar. In Caesarea sat a Christian bishop, while pagan gods were cultivated alongside the Talmudic investigations of rabbis who infrequently had occasion to mention the imperial government in their disputations. At Petra, amid the rock tombs of ancient Nabataean worthies, and virtually adjacent to a Nabataean temple, stood a Christian church within earshot of the annual celebration of the birth of the indigenous god Dusares. That church revealed, in December 1994, a fabulous archive of approximately one hundred fifty papyrus rolls concerning secular issues of various kinds, notably property claims and land tenure among the city's mixed population, still sporting Nabataean names along with Greek and Arabic.¹⁷ At Oboda, modern 'Avdat in the Negev, one of the old Nabataean kings was buried, and he was worshiped there as a god well into late antiquity.¹⁸ At Elusa (Halutza), not far from the

¹⁴ Procopius, *Anecdota* 11.32.

¹⁵ Ioann. Maium., *Pleroph.* X and LVI (F. Nau, *ROC* [1898], 243–44 and 367–68).

¹⁶ B. Lifshitz and J. Schiby, "Une synagogue samaritaine à Thessalonique," *RevBibl* 75 (1968), 368–77. For Samaritans at Rhodes, Delos, Athens, and elsewhere, see J. and L. Robert, *Bulletin épigraphique* (1969), no. 369. For the Nabataeans at Miletus and Delos, see the references assembled in G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 51, no. 25.

¹⁷ J. Frösén and Z. T. Fiema, *ACOR Newsletter* 6.2 (1994), 1–3.

¹⁸ Uranius apud Steph. Byz., *FGrHist*, III C 675, F 24. Cf. A. Negev, "Obodas the God," *IEJ* 36 (1986), 56–60.

route of the pilgrims to Jerusalem and all the churches that arose to accommodate them, a small theater of imperial date, brought to light in the early 1970s, was refurbished in the fifth century (in 454–455) at the expense of a local citizen with a name that symbolized Palestinian society. The benefactor was Abraamios, son of Zenobios: a man with a good Semitic name who was the son of a man with a good Greek name.¹⁹ His city was the place that Hilarion had visited a century before at a solemn time when the inhabitants were holding a festival in the temple of Venus. Abraamios repaved the regional theater, where the citizens of Byzantine Elusa will have watched pagan mimes and perhaps even more lascivious entertainments.

Of such entertainments, the festival of the Maioumas ranks among the most prominent. With its name derived from the Semitic word for water (*may*), it attracted enthusiastic crowds in the cities of the Near East and Anatolia. Gaza, with a port of the same name and a lively pagan cult of Marnas, is a prime candidate for the celebration of the Maioumas. The recent discovery of a vast shallow pool at Aphrodisias in Caria together with an inscription honoring a leader of the festival called Maioumarch leaves no doubt that this was an aquatic affair, as indeed a text of John Chrysostom had long since implied—an aquatic affair with scantily clad sirens cavorting in the water.²⁰ It will not be forgotten that the Maioumas survived at Constantinople into the reign of Leo IV in the eighth century as a celebration in the baths of the Sophianae.²¹ Christians could—and obviously did—enjoy all this, despite the railings of a Chrysostom or Jacob of Sarug, and we ought not to have been surprised to find that the newly discovered Maioumarch at Aphrodisias was a Christian. Monotheist faith and polytheist pleasure were by no means incompatible in the real world, however much they might have been in homilies.

We have seen that the Christian habit of depositing heretics and non-Christians of whatever persuasion into a general category of pagans and outcasts led to a strange but powerful conjunction of non-Christian monotheists, including Jews and their traditional enemies the Samaritans, with all kinds of polytheists. To this diverse assemblage were added the masses of benevolent Christians who savored pagan practices to a degree that they cannot have judged particularly harmful to their souls. Imperial legislation was strict and repeated, but largely ineffectual in Palestine.

What provided such cohesion as there was arose not only from Hellenism in both its cultural and religious senses but from an extraordinarily tenacious institution that had deep roots in the pre-Constantinian era. This was the cult of the emperors that began with Caesar Augustus. It is often forgotten that this unifying phenomenon, in the face of which famous Christians had gone to martyrdom and within which the elites of the empire had risen to influence and prominence, was adopted by Constantine and continued

¹⁹A. Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* (Jerusalem, 1981), 73–76.

²⁰John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Matt.* 7.6, PG 57, col. 79.

²¹Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1883–85; repr. Hildesheim, 1963), I, 451.25–27. In opposition to the *communis opinio*, M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory* (Cambridge, 1986), 138 n. 22, argues that the passage refers to the distribution of largess on the basis of a middle Byzantine sense of μαῖουμᾶς, “largess.” He believes that the setting for this event was the Sophianae palace. But it would be an odd coincidence if Theophanes’ reference to a distribution in a palace happened precisely to combine the name of an aquatic festival, well known to the Suda in the Middle Ages, with the name of baths mentioned elsewhere by the same author. Recently K. Mentzu-Maimare has reaffirmed the reference to the festival in Theophanes: “Der χαριέστατος Μαῖουμᾶς,” *BZ* 89 (1996), 58–73.

by his successors. Sacrifice appears to have been eliminated from the cult of the Christian emperors, but the political and social aspects of the cult were hardly altered. Constantine's espousal of it remains one of the strongest arguments in support of Burckhardt's characterization of this ruler, a characterization that owes much to Gibbon's perceptive portrait of him as a second Augustus.

For Garth Fowden, as we have seen, the imperial cult was the source of polytheist universalism. But the system was not all that different in the Christian empire. The fault lines in the political and social terrain of Arabia and the three Palestines certainly did not lie along the division between monotheists and polytheists. In view of the emerging insignificance of that division, it is worth asking whether the Christian cult of the emperors retained some of its old magic in the imperialist aims of Byzantium. The official cult was finally brought to an end after Valentinian in view of its manifest incompatibility with formal Christian doctrine. But no one interfered with its survival at the local level.²² *Flamines* turn up in North Africa in the fifth century, and Constantine was revered as a god (ὥς θεός), according to Philostorgius, in the city that bore his name. In a decree of 425 Theodosius II can write without embarrassment of his own *numen* and the reverence paid to his images at public festivals. He is careful to avoid the ultimate worship (*sine adorationis ambitioso fastigio*) and to distinguish the *supernum numen* from *nostrum numen*. But the force of the institution cannot be missed in his words.²³

The rabbis were in no doubt about the imperial cult in late antiquity. Rabbi Meir is quoted in the Mishna as saying, "All statues are forbidden because they are worshiped at least once a year."²⁴ The discussion of his saying is taken up in the Palestinian Talmud in very explicit terms: "If it is clear that the statues are of kings, all agree that benefit from them is forbidden. If it is clear that the statues are of governors, all agree that benefit is allowed."²⁵ The kings, like *basileis* in Greek, are unmistakably the emperors, and their statues are forbidden without rabbinic dissent. The explanation is likely to lie in the persistence of cult. By contrast, statues of governors are allowed. No cults of governors had been allowed in the Roman Empire since the reign of Augustus, and it may be confidently asserted that statues of governors in the Byzantine Empire were not the objects of worship either. This is presumably why the rabbis saw no difficulty in having them. The display of the governor's image was no more than a traditional and reasonable way to attract his benevolence and patronage. What is particularly interesting here is the rabbis' acceptance of the institution that lay behind the images—their avoidance of cult but their solicitation of favor. Without forfeiting their principles, they were working within the system.

The Christian and Jewish testimony combine to illuminate a world in which polytheist universalism, as Fowden would put it, fueled the Byzantine government. We ought not, therefore, to be surprised when we read on a sixth-century inscription of Caesarea-by-the-Sea that a basilica and the steps on a Hadrianeum had recently been brought to

²² Bowersock, "The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence," 180, repr. 336.

²³ *Flamen*: CIL 8.10516 (Ammaedara, early 6th century, *flamen perpetuus Christianus*). Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.*, GCS (1972), 28. CTh 15.4.1: *Ludis quoque simulacra proposita tantum in animis concurrentum mentisque secretis nostrum numen et laudes vigere demonstrent; excedens cultura hominum dignitatem superno numini reservetur.*

²⁴ Mishnah, *Aboda Zara* 3.1.

²⁵ Yerushal., *Aboda Zara* 3.1 (42b).

completion.²⁶ The suggestion of Lee Levine that the Hadrianeum preserved an old name on a building used for another purpose than the imperial cult ought to be resisted. In the mixed population of Caesarea this is just what we ought to have expected. Even more, we ought to have expected to find it frequented not only by the Hellenes of the city but, at least on particularly festive occasions, by its Christians as well.

Similarly, at Scythopolis in the Jewish House of Leonitis a mosaic floor displayed a representation of the Sirens' tempting of Odysseus. Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster have commented recently that such representations of classical tradition belong to what they call a "realm of culture" and do not necessarily provide "a sign of the survival of pagan beliefs."²⁷ This is absolutely correct, but a precondition of this realm of culture is that at the same time there really were other people for whom this culture was still alive and meaningful. Pagan cults belonged now to the minority, but without them the majority would have lacked any interest in them. Classical mythology unified these diverse constituencies.

Accordingly, if the division between polytheism and monotheism did not expose the fault lines in the compacted terrain of late antique Palestinian society, it becomes necessary to look for those lines elsewhere. No society is without them, but the relative tranquillity of the region over many centuries shows that here at least they were not serious impediments to stability. But when problems arose, they reflected without exception the tensions among monotheists of various persuasions. Even more clear is that the tensions were internecine, in other words not emanating from hostilities between totally different peoples such as Jews and Christians but rather from hostilities within groups of related peoples. The confrontation of Jewish monotheist and Samaritan is mirrored in the comparable confrontation of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, although neither had cataclysmic consequences. These disturbances do, however, serve to indicate where potential trouble could be sought.

The polytheists had nothing to do with all this, and this may well be the reason that their culture survives after the Muslim conquest in the places where it can be observed. The lively neo-Platonism of Harran has been extensively studied in recent years, and it was described with interest and without animosity by Arab chroniclers.²⁸ The exuberantly representational paintings of Qusayr al-Amra stood proudly before its Islamic residents,²⁹ who may be assumed to have enjoyed them without fear of compromise just as Christians had celebrated the Maioumas and applauded the mimes. In a world of competing monotheisms the pagans were not a threat. They were a *divertissement*.

By the early sixth century both Jews and pagans had become minority peoples in a Christian world. The Jews showed no sign of aspiring to universal domination along the lines of Fowden's bold theory, but the transformation of Eretz Israel of the Jewish monotheists into the Holy Land of the Christian monotheists left a residue of regret. It was clearly not enough to provoke resistance on its own, but unfortunately it was quite

²⁶L. Levine, *Roman Caesarea* (Jerusalem, 1975), 21.

²⁷Y. Tsafrir and G. Foerster, "From Scythopolis to Baysân: Changing Concepts of Urbanism," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, ed. G. R. D. King and A. Cameron, II (Princeton, 1994), 95–115, esp. 102 for the quotation.

²⁸Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* 4.64–65 (Barbier de Meynard). Cf. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 36–37, and M. Tardieu, "Šābiens coraniques et <šābiens> de Ḥarrān," *JA* 274 (1986), 1–44.

²⁹Cf. O. Grabar, "La place de Qusayr Amrah dans l'art profane du Haut Moyen Âge," *CahArch* 36 (1988), 75–83.

sufficient to provide support for an alien invader in 614. Jewish sympathy for the Persians at that time was founded upon an ancient and unfulfilled desire to reclaim their land. Such sympathy was to some extent irrational, as no Palestinian Jew had any good traditional reason, apart perhaps from memories of Esther, to expect the Persians to make a better world for them than the Christians. But the sympathy was nonetheless strong, and a partial explanation of this may be at hand. Some forty years earlier the Jews of South Arabia had made common cause with the Persians and thereby succeeded in the removal of their Abyssinian overlords, who had imposed Christianity upon the region.³⁰ Such a notorious collaboration provides a comprehensible diplomatic background for the behavior of the Palestinian Jews in the early seventh century. It also demonstrates the importance of looking beyond Palestine and Arabia in trying to determine what disrupted an equilibrium of remarkably long duration.

The books of Elijah and Zerubbabel, which most probably belong to this age, reflect in their apocalyptic language the view that the Christians had defiled the land of the Jews—"this polluted land" as it was called. Robert Wilken has rightly observed: "The Persian occupation of Jerusalem made a deep impression on the Jews. In later Jewish tradition, it overshadowed the Muslim conquest."³¹ It is not easy to recapture the historical events from this later tradition, but the tradition itself bears witness to the vain hopes that the Jews placed in the outsiders from Iran.

From the Christian perspective the Jews seemed to have betrayed the commitment to Palestine that all peoples resident there had maintained since the revolt of Bar Kokhba in the second century. The monk Strategius of the Lavra of Mar Saba may not be exaggerating very much when he writes that the Jews rejoiced when they saw the Christians being handed over to the Persians: so great was the influence of Jews with the Persians, he declared, that they devised a cruel scheme to force Christians to become Jews in order to win freedom from their captors.³² The bitterness of Strategius is real and unmistakable, as is that of Sophronius in his poem on the captivity of Jerusalem. For him the Jews are quite simply friends of the Persians.

The powerful resurgence of hostility between Jews and Christians in 614 deserves a closer look because we are lucky to have in Strategius a detailed and circumstantial eyewitness account of a tumultuous time that altered irrevocably the religious character of Palestine. This writer is a very different person from another monk at Mar Saba called Antiochus, with whom he is often identified. A few fragments in Greek, available in Migne's *Patrology*, overlap some of the material in Strategius but are demonstrably not the same source.³³ Even Strategius' name is often misspelled as Strategos (usually in conjunction with the name Antiochus), as most recently in Wilken's book on the Holy Land

³⁰C. Robin, *L'Arabie antique de Karib 'il à Mahomet* (Aix-en-Provence, 1993), 144–50. Cf. G. W. Bowersock, "The New Greek Inscription from South Yemen," in *TO EAAHNIKON: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis, Jr.*, ed. J. Langdon et al., 2 vols. (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1993), I, 3–8, repr. in *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire* (as above, note 5), 385–90.

³¹Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 213.

³²Strategius 10.2: *La prise de Jérusalem par les Perses en 614*, ed. G. Garitte, CSCO 203 (Louvain, 1960), 17, line 30. See B. Flusin, *St. Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1992), II, 162–64, 168.

³³PG 86.2, cols. 3222–23, with excerpts from an account by a Palestinian monk Antiochus, whom earlier scholars identified with Strategius and were pleased to name Antiochus Strategos. That unfortunate hybrid still stalks the literature on the 7th century.

and in a singularly vacuous article of 1991 by an author who relies upon a crude, selective English translation of 1910 while immodestly describing himself as a “discerning reader.”³⁴ The precious Georgian translation of Strategius’ original Greek, despite some accretions at the end, brings us much nearer to his lost text than the amplified Arabic translations, and for those who are innocent of Georgian, Gérard Garitte’s meticulous Latin rendering of 1960 provides convenient access.

Strategius’ detailed account of persons and places in Jerusalem is supplemented by observations on the social struggles within the city just before and during the invasion. Particularly remarkable is his invocation of the disturbances of Jerusalem’s Blue and Green factions as the provocation for God’s displeasure (2.3 and 2.6). In Jerusalem and everywhere else the factions did not take shape from religious affiliations. Strategius obviously found fault with Christians for participating in them. When the Persian menace came near, he tells us that the pagans promptly fled from the city before them (7.3). This exodus is confirmed by Leontius, the biographer of John the Almoner, who reports that many went to Alexandria.³⁵ The Georgian text of Strategius mirrors unmistakably the language of the original text: Modestus, sent by Patriarch Zacharias to the Greeks, tried to persuade them to remain in the city, but the Greeks fled. These Greeks are the Hellenes, that is to say the pagans or polytheists according to late antique diction. It was the Jews and the Christians, both anchored to Jerusalem by its holy places, who stayed to face the Persians, the former with high hopes and the latter in despair. The Persians laid siege to the city wall and, on the twenty-first day, breached it. Its defenders fled into caves and cisterns.

Strategius is uncompromising in his denunciation of the Jews as evil, as enemies of truth, and as haters of Christians. They perceive only the shadow of the truth but fail to comprehend the mystery of the radiant sun of justice. Strategius is no less intolerant of the Samaritan monotheists, to whom he refuses to listen because they deny bodily resurrection. This explosion of sectarianism, including a fierce revival of the dormant hatred between Jews and Christians, was unleashed by the external power of the invading forces that came from Persia.

Paradoxically, the encompassing empire of Byzantium had provided the security that the three Palestines and Arabia needed to prosper with relative peace among the peoples and faiths to be found there. The fact that this peace extended, without major disruptions, across the epochs of polytheist and monotheist imperial rule proves conclusively, if it still needs proving, that the number of gods in whom one believed had nothing to do with the all too human aspiration for universal domination.

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³⁴B. M. Wheeler, “Imagining the Sasanian [*sic*] Capture of Jerusalem,” *OCP* 57 (1991), 69–95. Cf. p. 85: “As more discerning readers, we can begin to evaluate these texts not only as sources of ‘facts,’ but as imaginative depictions of how the world might be.” The English translation of F. C. Conybeare in *EHR* 25 (1910), 502–17, is incomplete and unreliable.

³⁵Leontius, *Vie de Jean de Chypre, dit l’Aumônier*, ed. A.-J. Festugière (Paris, 1974), 11.8–12.